

(15) Poetry Developments After 1945

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John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, Cynthia MacDonald

Transitional Poets

Various Poets

• a convenient label for otherwise very diverse poets who were born mostly in the 1920s, started publishing Formalist Academic poetry in the 1950s and turned to free verse forms and more adventurous subjects only later

A(rchie) R(andolph) Ammons (1926–2001)

Cosmos & Man

- born in North Carolina, but does not show the Southern obsession with the psychological aftermath of history
- stands closer to the New England **Transcendentalist**, at times even refers to lines from Emerson and Whitman
- believes that verse lines serve only to trigger to the readable surface the poetic images inherently present there
- writes as a poet of the mind, deals with the cosmos and man, with linguistics and words in reference to things

Science & Nature

- produces **metaphysical** poetry focused on penetrating the surfaces and exploring the mystery of all existence
- studied zoology, which is reflected in his concern with science and nature and in some of his specific imagery
- employs numerous professional terms from biology, geology, chemistry and physics, uses many abstract terms
- published prolifically, but did not achieve wider recognition until the publication of his *Selected Poems* (1968)

Poetry Volumes

Ommateum (1955)

- his first collection introduced what was to become his theme of putting off the flesh and taking on the universe
- the title is a zoological term for compound eye, as of insects, and implies a praise of a complex view of nature

Corsons Inlet (1965)

- the title poem is a meditation occasioned by a walk in sand dunes, links the act of walking to that of writing

Sphere: The Form of a Motion (1974)

- the title of the collection refers to the author's conviction that **development** is the invariable constant of being
- the nature richly reflects the laws of existence and abounds in non-linear shapes like circles, ovals or spheres
- the poems exploit the colon as the most frequent punctuation symbol, suggesting the continuity of utterance

Philip Levine (b. 1928)

Outsider Position

- born in Detroit, Michigan, to a Jewish Russian immigrant family, his home city figures in much of his writing
- started writing in the Formalist Academic mode, did not lack formal skills but failed to appeal to the audience
- turned to free verse forms and eventually mastered an **anarchic** poetry charged with raw energy and emotions
- defies classification with any poetic school, acts as a bard of underprivileged working class **losers** and failures

City Losers

- expresses anger with and hatred for institutions as well as sympathy with and affection for simple poor people
- resembles Walt Whitman (1819–1892) with his subject matter and colloquial language, but lacks his optimism
- produces **urban poetry** concentrated on the dark aspects of the city, its violence, frustrations, pain and sadness
- presents defeated characters who however do not immerse in defeatist moods, keep on going, never giving up
- becomes more personal and intimate throughout the 1970s, renders his own history as archetypal experience

Academic

On the Edge (1963)

- his first poetry collection uses conventional verse form, metre, rhyme and stanza patterns, but radical content
- the title poem shows his penchant for using the names of famous people, in this case Edgar Allen Poe, and attributing them to working-class characters who have failed in their lives and offer a record of their frustrations

Open-Form

Not This Pig (1968)

- the collection marks a shift towards loose forms serving to capture a momentary mood or to dramatize a story

Pig Speaker

'Animals Are Passing From Our Lives'

- the poem is written in **syllabic verse** and assumes the voice of a pig to be slaughtered and processed for meat
- the pig on its way to the slaughterhouse comments on society, criticizing its consumerism and conformism

Anarchic

They Feed They Lion (1972)

- the title poem is written in free verse and working-class dialect, inspired by **racial riots** in Detroit in the 1960s
- the growing lion symbolizes the rising anger of the discriminated minorities which resorted to violent protests
- the poem effectively builds up a dramatic tension, using anaphoric repetitions, to relieve the energy at the end

Personal

One for the Rose (1981)

- the title poem traces the return of the speaker to a once familiar place to find it utterly changed and frustrating, the speaker is very un-American in his admitting his failure and showing the suffocation of isolated small towns

Adrienne Rich (b. 1929)

- Developments
- began in the Formalistic mode in the 1950s, influenced by W. H. Auden, William Butler Yeats or John Donne
 - turned to free verse in the 1960s to accommodate her dynamic identity of a woman, wife, mother and feminist
 - moved towards **lesbian sensibility** in the 1970s, after the breakdown of her marriage followed by the suicide of her husband, rejected her heterosexual identity in order to remedy the patriarchal evil in the American society
- Academic
- A Change of the World* (1951)
- her first collection proves her mastery of conservative forms but already contains germs of feminist sensibility
- ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’
- the poem portrays a woman oppressed by the burden of her marriage but still knitting a pattern of wild tigers
- Feminist
- Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963)
- her groundbreaking collection written in loose forms and personal tone, focused on the experience of women
 - the title poem contains ten sections which record the history of patriarchal oppression, playing on chauvinistic quotations of western literature classics and introducing a new woman who defies her role as dictated by society
- Deep Image
- Diving into the Wreck* (1973)
- winner of the National Book Award (1974), accepted it not as a personal honour but as a homage to all women
 - the title poem describes both a physical diving into the sea and a spiritual descent into the depths of one’s soul, portrays the speaker merging both the male and female elements into a unique imaginary androgynous identity
- ‘A Valediction Forbidding Mourning’
- the poem undermines the original version written by the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet John Donne, portrays the breakdown of communication in a relationship, reflecting the tension in nervous fragmentary syntax
- Language Barrier
- The Dream of a Common Language* (1978)
- the collection focuses on the language which sets up a barrier for women in the public and private sphere alike

James Wright (1927–1980)

- Earlier Stages
- born in the Midwest to working-class parents, which shows in his sympathy for the stricken and impoverished
 - started with Formalistic Academic poetry indebted to the neoclassical and romantic tradition of English poets
 - underwent a development from closed to freer forms, from general to more personal and subjective themes
 - preoccupied with pastoral America, wrote predominantly nature poems, **country poems** or small-town poems
 - exploited the device of epiphany, concluded some of his poems with a surprising or even shocking revelation
- Later Work
- produced also condensed philosophical and meditative **prose poems**, which was a favourite mode in the 1970s
 - translated Spanish poetry, as by Pablo Neruda (1904–1973), and the Austrian poet Georg Trakl (1887–1914), who helped him define the ‘**deep image**’ concept of poetry which opens doors ‘into unused parts of the brain’
 - collaborated on translations with Robert Bly, whose work similarly explores the concept of deep image poetry
- Poetry Volumes
- The Branch Will Not Break* (1963)
- his groundbreaking collection which marks his rejection of formalism and shift to a more spontaneous poetry
 - the language becomes more natural, the voice more immediate and the penetration into layers of reality deeper
 - the collection includes his famous ‘Lying in a Hammock...’ ending with the revelation ‘I have wasted my life’
- Shall We Gather at the River* (1968), *Collected Poems* (1971), *Moments of the Italian Summer* (1976)
- the volume of collected poems won the author official recognition by being awarded the Pulitzer Prize (1972)

The New York School

- Painting & Writing
- a loose group of New York avant-garde painters, musicians and poets prominent from the **1950s** to **mid-1960s**
 - influenced by contemporary American arts, by **abstract expressionism** in pictorial arts and avant-garde music
 - influenced also by European avant-garde arts, especially French, by movements like surrealism and dadaism
 - inspired by the modernist poetry of William Carlos Williams (1893–1963) and Wallace Stevens (1894–1955)
 - rebelled against the established tradition of Academic Formalism and the Eliotic impersonality of Modernism
 - resembled somewhat the Beats, but unlike them fought against the cultural rather than political establishment
 - preoccupied with mixing of the high and low culture and writing as a **creative process** with uncertain results

John Ashbery (b. 1927)

- Inspirations
- interested in all forms of art, painted and composed music, both of these influences are reflected in his poetry
 - studied and translated French literature, spent a decade in France where he worked as an art critic for journals
 - enjoys the reputation of a determinedly avant-garde poet who is original sometimes to the extent of obscurity

- Relations
- rejects the Whitmanesque openly personal mode, prefers the apparently outwardly impersonal mode of writing
 - discards a mimetic representation of reality, captures the **fleeting nature** of reality that is impossible to grasp
 - employs surrealism and dream logic, challenges the meaning of his lines by using unexpected irrational shifts
 - uses the **words abstractly**, as an abstract painter uses paint, his lines stand simply as evidence of their creation
 - seeks to approximate the quality of music which is convincing merely through the structure, not the meaning
 - offers a series of unconnected fragments that are difficult to related to one another rather than coherent poems
 - experiments with shifting the subjects of poetry and with the notion of poetry as an unfinished creative process
 - attempts to record the process of the **acting mind**, constantly questions the way in which we perceive reality
 - challenges the language by placing phrases of street talk, popular culture or poetry clichés into new contexts

Collections ***Some Trees*** (1956)

- his first published poetry collection, the title poem presents a meditation on silent, unmoved and grave trees

Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1975)

- the collection first won him a wider acclaim, received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award
- the title poem compares the author's vision of reality to a ping-pong ball dancing on top of a water fountain

Houseboat Days (1977), ***As We Know*** (1979), ***Shadow Train*** (1981)

- the last collection was initially announced as 'Paradoxes and Oxymorons' for one of the poems included in it

Kenneth Koch¹ (1925–2002)

Comic &
Serious

- studied literature at Harvard University, Massachusetts, where he befriended John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara
- the most exuberantly witty representative of the New York Poets, unjustly dismissed by critics as '**light verse**'
- the comic surfaces of his poems often serve only as a cloak for exploration of serious philosophical questions
- an influential and inspiring literature and creative writing tutor, moulded a whole generation of younger poets
- himself influenced by his reading of French avant-garde writing and fascination by American popular culture
- wrote small-scale miniature lyrics, long epic poems in the Whitmanesque tradition as well as poetry **parodies**

Poetry
Volumes

Permanently (1960)

- the title poem of the collection is a strikingly original love poem and a meta-linguistic poem on parts of speech

Thank You and Other Poems (1962)

Against
Academics

'Fresh Air'

- the poem is a grotesque rant rebelling against the obsolete conservative academic approach to poetry writing
- consists of a speech of a young radical at a poetry society meeting who calls in vain for fresh air for poetry
- introduces the character of the Strangler who haunts the country and kills conservative poets, bids goodbye to the poetry muse in the shape of Helen of Troy and finally calls for a biblical flood to purge the literary scene
- the poem manifests the author at his best when he transforms extremism and hatred into harmless **clowning**

Parody
Poem

'Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams'

- the poem is a series of four brilliant parodic variations using the formula of Williams's 'This is Just to Say'

Painting
Parallels

When the Sun Tries to Go On (1969)

- an extended poem of a hundred stanzas which explores linguistic parallels to abstract expressionist painting

Later
Poetry

Girl and Baby Florist Sidewalk Pram Nineteen Seventy Something (1980)

- the title poem of the volume playfully deals with the language of relations, formulating and reformulating it

Frank O'Hara (1926–1966)

Paintings
& Poems

- the author was actively involved with New York fine arts scene and acquainted with many artistic personalities
- worked as assistant curator in the Museum of Modern Art where he organized exhibitions of contemporary art
- produced also book-length studies on the paintings of *Jackson Pollock* (1959) and *Robert Motherwell* (1965)
- uses techniques and vision of modernist painters and sculptors, seeks to create the **effect of painting** on canvas
- fills his poetry with **visual objects** taken from city streets and interiors to recreate the reality of the metropolis
- humanizes the city with his all-pervasive presence, feels a firm part of the concreteness and liveliness the city

New York
Man's Life

- uses himself not as a poetry subject but an instrument, tries both to take a distance and to identify with his city
- examines the mythical dimension of **modern consciousness** as represented by celebrities, movies and dreams
- wrote many occasional poems to friends and lost sight of them, many poems were found only after his death
- his '**Personim: A Manifesto**' (1959) is a mock-serious assertion of personal contact preferable to printed page
- his *Collected Poems* (1971) is a volume of more than five hundred pages, scrupulously edited by Donald Allen

¹ The author's last name is supposed to be pronounced in the same way as 'coke', that is America's most popular national beverage.

- Poetry Volumes **Oranges** (1953)
- an early volume of **prose poems**, their origin is later wittily dealt with in the poem 'Why I Am Not a Painter' which points out parallels between painting and poetry writing and contrasts the initial idea the the final result
- Mayakovsky **Second Avenue** (1960)
- a long poem issued as a pamphlet, dedicated to the memory of Vladimir Mayakovsky, who influenced the poet
- Casual Poems **Lunch Poems** (1964)
- the collection derives its name from the author's ability to produce spontaneously, as during his lunch break
 - includes 'A Step Away from Them', a poem tracing the speaker's way through city streets to have his lunch
 - also includes 'The Day Lady Died', a poem recording the feelings on the death of the singer Billie Holiday

Deep Image School

- Influences & Figures
- the origins of the movement are associated with the Midwestern poetry magazine **Fifties** (1958, subsequently **Sixties** and **Seventies**) edited by **Robert Bly** who advocated translations of Latin American and European poetry
 - promoted the Spanish poetry of Pablo Neruda (1904–1973) and Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), the Austrian poets Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and Georg Trakl (1887–1914) as well as French Decadent poets
 - in their emphasis on poetry in translations followed Ezra Pound's expatriate search for usable tradition abroad
 - as other movements of the time refused both Academic Formalism and the Eliotic impersonality of Modernism
 - represented by **W(illiam) S(tanley) Merwin** (b. 1927), **Galway Kinnell** (b. 1927), **James Wright** and others
- Jungian Archetypes
- the movement was prominent in the **1960s**, it was dissolved by the 1970s when the poets turned to other modes
 - attempted to descend into the collective unconsciousness, exploited the notion of an universal **archetypal self**
 - centred the poems around deep images which they expected to evoke certain shared stereotypical associations
 - drew images out of the bottomless abysses of one's deepest self, sought to present original **primaeval images**
 - employed **surrealist** methods, produced strictly nonmimetic, irrational, vague and often impenetrable poetry
 - nicknamed a school of 'stones, bones and silence', other favourite images were light, blood, breath and water

Robert Bly (b. 1926)

- Inspirations
- comes from the western plains of Minnesota, and the **rural experience** became a fruitful source for his poetry
 - protests again 'the destructive motion outward' in American poetry and calls for the 'plunge inward' instead
 - attempts an imaginative intensity with a 'swift movement all over the psyche, from conscious to unconscious'
 - draws his poetry from his individual experience of nature but also from his exploration of **history** and **politics**
 - became a co-founder of American Writers Against the Vietnam War (1966) and an activist defying the drafts
 - published a book on masculinity, *Iron John* (1990), and became a leader of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement

- Collections
- Silence in the Snowy Fields*** (1962)
- his first volume made him a spokesman for the Deep Image School, though he never produced any manifesto
 - **'Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River'**
 - the poem contrasts the small enclosed world of the car which the speaker drives and the larger world outside
 - the name of the river is also the name of the poet's hometown in Minnesota through which the speaker drives
- The Light Around the Body*** (1967)
- the collection won him a National Book Award (1968), the author donated the money to anti-draft activities

James Dickey (1923–1997)

- Modes
- born in Atlanta, Georgia, received his education at Vanderbilt University, formerly the cradle of New Criticism
 - disposed of the academic heritage of New Critics, inclined to Whitmanesque forms and **transcendental** modes
 - considered language as too much a form of energetic action to be meticulously shaped into a well-made poem
 - believed in letting the material of the poem come spontaneously to the surface, preferred 'un-well-made' forms
- Poetry
- Into the Stone*** (1960), ***Drowning with Others*** (1962), ***Buckdancer's Choice*** (1965)
- his earliest poetry collections, the last of the three mentioned won him reputation and a National Book Award
- Fiction
- Deliverance*** (1970)
- a novel, made into a film two years later, a violent adventure story turned into a modern allegorical fantasy

Feminist Poetry

- History
- poetry written by female authors lacked any continuous tradition to follow at least until the 1950s or the 1960s
 - the poetesses published earlier were viewed as rarities, as Anne Bradstreet, Phyllis Wheatley, Emily Dickinson

Present

- the first early wave of women poets arrived with the Modernists, as Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore or H.D.
- feminist poetry was enabled with women gaining the right to vote (1920) and to be admitted to universities
- earlier female poets were restricted by the patriarchal order, suffered from **'double-bind'**, that is they sought to find a specifically female voice but were reduced to using typically male aggressive methods in order to succeed
- the earlier poets who wished to present the realities of a woman's experience had to resort to subtle metaphors, only the Women's Liberation Movement helped introduce specifically **female subjects** which used to be taboo
- since the 1950s there appear subjects as sexual harassment, menstruation, domestic violence, lesbianism etc.
- since the late 1960s and 1970s there is a rise of radical feminist poetry written by women of **ethnic minorities**
- the representatives are the Jewish American leftist poet **Muriel Rukeyser** (1913–1980), the African American radical militant feminist **June Jordan** (1936–2002) or the Asian American poet publishing as **Ai** (1947–2010)

Cynthia MacDonald (b. 1928)

Influences
& Modes

- began her varied artistic career as a concert and opera singer, which is reflected in the musicality of her verse
- turned to poetry writing on the advice of Anne Sexton, originally for therapeutic purposes in moments of crisis
- influenced by Emily Dickinson, inspired also by modernist arts, in particular by surrealism and expressionism
- explores the suffering and pain of human life in a sardonic, often **flippant tone**, shows a dark sense of humour
- employs a **grotesque imagery** to comment on the mundane, uses transformed objects in dream-like sequences

Collections

Amputations (1972)

- her first poetry volume uses unnerving imagery and lively wordplay and exploits her fascination with 'freaks'
- each poem in the volume shows a character with missing body parts, symbolizing inner losses of love and life

Transplants (1976)

- her second collection marks a shift in tone, the characters and voices seem to be more substantial and complex

(W)holes (1980)

- the collection is dominated by a poetic sequence called **'Burying the Babies'**, which interweaves quotations of various prose and poetry lines by other writers and the poet's original lines, marked by a feminist sensibility